E Pluribus Unicorn and Sturgeon Is Alive and Well Short Guide

E Pluribus Unicorn and Sturgeon Is Alive and Well by Theodore Sturgeon

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Characters

Characterization poses a special problem for science fiction writers.

In addition to establishing and resolving plot conflicts, they frequently attempt to create plausible imaginary worlds. Not surprisingly, then, writers often rely heavily on a limited gallery of stock characters — genius inventors, mad scientists, intrepid explorers, and gallant spacemen — who serve mainly to advance the plot or articulate the author's ideas or gimmicks. One of Sturgeon's main contributions to science fiction in the 1940s and 1950s (a contribution he was able to make perhaps because he frequently wrote other kinds of stories and thus lacked the narrow "ghetto" mentality of many science fiction writers) was to make psychological conflict central to the short story. Instead of characters who exhibit their creator's cleverness at inventing and solving intellectual puzzles (e.g. Asimov's robot stories) or who perform melodramatic feats of derring-do (as in countless "space operas"), Sturgeon emphasizes characters who confront some ethical or emotional dilemma. His protagonists are tormented by loneliness or frustrated love; they suffer from the bigotry and narrow-mindedness of society; they learn to come to terms with their own gifts and limitations.

Sturgeon's concern with the inner life of his characters does not necessarily mean that they are all portrayed in great psychological depth. At times his characters are little more than embodiments of the story's theme. In "A Saucer of Loneliness" (E Pluribus Unicorn, 1953) the two protagonists remain nameless, and relatively little information is given about them. What is important is that they embody both the desperate loneliness of people never accepted for who and what they are, and the possibility of fulfillment in reaching out to the loneliness of others.

Often Sturgeon employs a stock character but shows him in a new perspective. The hero of "Slow Sculpture" is that fixture of science fiction — the lone inventor whose home laboratory is more productive than any ten university or industrial research centers. But for once the focus of the story is not on his gadgets or on melodramatic plot contrivances. Instead, Sturgeon emphasizes the inventor's growing sense of alienation and futility, and traces the way in which he is brought to hope, once again, that his talents can do some good. And finally, in some of his longer stories, Sturgeon indeed creates complex and substantial characters, like Giles in "To Here and the Easel," another genius who has lost faith in his talent and only gradually learns how properly to value himself and others.

Social Concerns

With the exception of More Than Human (1953), Sturgeon has done his finest work in short fiction. His best stories, however, remain scattered among a half dozen or more collections. These two collections are chosen to represent his short fiction because they contain several of his best stories and are drawn from two of his most creative periods.

While some of his stories are designed to evoke terror and others simply to entertain, many of Sturgeon's most popular fictions are very much message stories. Two of the stories collected in Sturgeon Is Alive and Well, "Slow Sculpture" (1970) and "Brownshoes" (1969 — originally titled "The Man Who Learned Loving"), are best viewed in the context of the period in which they were written. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the hopes raised by the Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements were collapsing, and many of the youthful participants were turning to violence or lapsing into apathetic withdrawal. Both stories are counsels against despair; they argue that meaningful change takes time, dedication, and a loving patience. Nothing worthwhile can be achieved by apathy or self-righteous alienation. The plot of each story is simple — almost parablelike. In "Brownshoes," for instance, a one-time hippie discovers a safe and inexpensive way of generating almost limitless energy. But he realizes that if he simply announces his discovery that it will be misused or swallowed up by corporations which fear the loss of profits. So he takes the long road; he sacrifices much of his freedom to "infiltrate" the system. By doing so he is eventually able to share his invention with the world and change the system forever. And his patience, self-sacrifice, and ultimate success are sharply contrasted with the self-righteous and futile behavior of his former lover, who considers him a traitor for working within the system. It is hard not to see stories like this as allegorical pleas to the despairing radicals of the countercultural movements to continue their struggle against racism, militarism, and economic injustice.

Techniques

Briefly summarized, some of Sturgeon's best stories may sound trite or sentimental. But his best stories are told with a mastery of language and structure that makes them impressive works of art. "Slow Sculpture," for instance, succeeds in large measure because of the controlling metaphor of the bonsai tree. The inventor has been lovingly and patiently shaping a tree for half his life. He knows that "the shaping of a bonsai is ... always a compromise and always a cooperation.

A man cannot create bonsai, nor can a tree; it takes both." In the midst of his despair over society's unwillingness to make proper use of his inventions, the woman he has cured reminds him that his failure derives in part from his own arrogance, his unwillingness to compromise or cooperate. And she shows him that in his bonsai he already has a profound insight into the proper way to try to shape society — with patience, love, and respect for its nature.

In "To Here and the Easel" it is the wit and exuberance of Sturgeon's language that make the story such an unfailing delight. Here is Sturgeon's prose at its richest and most poetic, filled with brilliant word play, studded with lovely descriptions, and abounding in vivid comic dialogue. Nor is it merely an exhibition of style for the sake of style. Giles's language — punning, allusive, and richly metaphoric — is precisely the right expression for the high-strung genius openly outraged at the world and secretly afraid he has lost his gift. His voice is juxtaposed effectively with Rogero's style, a nice imitation of Ariosto. Even the seemingly incongruous parallels with Orlando Furioso add a depth of meaning and insight to Giles's experience.

Themes

Love is Sturgeon's great theme, and his short stories explore both the dark and bright sides. "Bianca's Hands" (E Pluribus Unicorn; first published in 1947 but written in 1939) is a haunting account of a young man's obsession with the beautiful hands of an otherwise ugly and idiotic woman. Ultimately he marries the woman, just to be near her hands. And on their wedding night, he blissfully allows the hands to strangle him. In other stories (as in Godbody, 1986) Sturgeon is intent on broadening his readers' understanding and tolerance of variant forms of human sexuality. "The World Well Lost" (E Pluribus Unicorn, 1953) attacks the unthinking fear and hatred of homosexuals in American society. There is a fairly elaborate science fictional framework, but in essence the story is simply a call for compassion and tolerance. It is also a story that perhaps typifies some of Sturgeon's weaknesses as a writer, for the humanity and generosity of the message are not matched by the quality of the vehicle. Once a reader gets over the audacity of a science fiction story of the 1950s expressing any sympathy at all for homosexuality, he might notice certain implausibilities. Although the story is set in a supposedly jaded and sybaritic society, the hero is a homosexual who secretly and unrequitedly loves a homophobic shipmate and agonizes over the possibility of exposure. The reader wonders why there are not other homosexuals for him to share his love with, and why he is content to love a man who can never return his love, who would indeed despise him if his secret were known.

And yet there is something moving about the inarticulate hero holding on desperately to even this unfulfilling and furtive love. Perhaps he, like the doomed young hero of "Bianca's Hands," typifies humanity's need for some kind of love — even when that love is unsatisfying or destructive.

But love is also a profoundly redemptive force in Sturgeon's art. "To Here and the Easel" (Sturgeon Is Alive and Well, 1954) tells the story — probably at least partly autobiographical — of Giles, a once-successful artist suffering through a terrible creative block.

The narrative cuts back and forth between his crises and a sequence of hallucinatory episodes in which he imaginatively identifies with Rogero, a knight (borrowed from Ariosto's Orlando Furioso, 1516-1532) rendered powerless by an enchanter's spell. The parallel between the imprisoned knight and the artist unable to create is both a bravura piece of storytelling and a wonderfully perceptive metaphor for the artistic experience. Ultimately Giles, in both of his manifestations, is freed by the love of a woman who believes in him and teaches him to believe once again in himself and in the reality of beauty.

A similar pattern is followed in "Slow Sculpture," a kind of counterpart to "Brownshoes." In this case the hero, a brilliant scientist-inventor, has fallen into the trap that "Brownshoes" avoided: His inventions have been gobbled up by corporations to destroy possible competition and loss of profits. Enraged and bitter, he sits imprisoned by despair on his own estate, convinced of the futility of further effort, until he too is saved

by the love of a woman. Both "Slow Sculpture" and "To Here and the Easel" flirt with overly sentimental and pat resolutions; each escapes, by the wit and elegance of their execution.

Literary Precedents

It is not always possible to point to specific stories as precedents for Sturgeon's shorter fiction. One might say instead that the pulp science fiction and fantasy of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s provided him with a set of literary conventions which he frequently transformed into effective metaphors for his abiding concern with the themes of loneliness and love. "To Here and the Easel," on the other hand, owes some clear debts. Its basic plot and much of its style derive from Orlando Furioso. Sturgeon might also have been aware of a 1941 novel, The Castle of Iron (1941), by L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, which might have suggested the basic literary conceit of juxtaposing a modern man with the romantic world of Ariosto. But as James Blish has noted, while de Camp and Pratt write a purely comic adventure story, Sturgeon uses the gimmick for a far more serious purpose. Sturgeon's basic relationship to his sources and precedents is that of an artist who takes a variety of materials and shapes them to his own purposes.

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